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Consortia Standards: Towards a Re-Definition of a Voluntary Consensus Standards Organization

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Good afternoon, Chairman Ehlers, and thank you for inviting me to testify. I am Carl Cargill, Director of Standards at Sun Microsystems, a multibillion dollar multinational information systems company. My statement is based upon my experience in the Information Technology standardization arena and reflects the views of a practicing manager in standardization in the Information Technology arena. My full written testimony is attached to this shorter overview.

The theme of today's hearing is "Standards Setting and United States Competitiveness". I do not believe that there is a more successful example of the use of standards for competitive purposes than the IT industry. The U.S. based multinationals who are the sources of innovation and growth for the IT sector all recognize the importance of standards and invest in them heavily. Most IT companies – large and small – participate in some standards setting arena or the other.

What makes the IT companies unusual, however, is their willingness to explore new methods of standardization – methods that are more responsive to the needs of their technology and industry. One of the methods that IT companies have chosen to use is the creation of consortia – groups of like minded organizations that have joined together to produce specifications that further the market. It is important to recognize is that these are organizations – usually commercial companies,

academia, and occasionally government – who use the consortia structure do so to produce common specifications which benefit the entire market.

The growth of this form of standardization has been phenomenal, starting from only a few organizations in 1980 to well over several hundred now. There is no aspect of IT which they do not touch, from optical backplane interconnects to Web languages to UNIX ®. They are the preferred vehicle for standardization in IT. Led by U.S. multinationals, consortia and their specifications have been essential in the growth of the IT industry.

But these organizations are part of the ISO/ANSI federation of standardization. They operate under usually strict processes and procedures, and focus on the creation of specific technical solutions. They are "pay-to-play" and funded by their membership – much the same as ANSI is. They receive no Federal monies except as membership dues or for contract work. They live – or die – by their ability to attract members. And these consortia do attract members from all over the world. They usually hold their meetings in English, publish their specifications in English, and see their specifications productized by U.S. companies. These specifications are not U.S. specifications – they are made for a world wide market. A country that rejects them rejects information commonality with the rest of the world. But, it is important to note that – in a disproportionate number of cases – the companies who exploit the technologies to gain a competitive edge (both in producing products and in implementing those products) are U.S. based.

Over the past ten years, however, there has been a gulf opening between consortia and the formal process. ISO has tried to open doors to consortia, but they have always assumed that consortia wanted to be part of the formal process and placed conditions upon their entry. Needless to say, consortia believe that they are legitimate in their own right and have not been wildly enthusiastic about becoming like the organizations from which they were created to be different. The gulf is nowhere more apparent than in the area of government procurement. For ten years, I have heard constant assertions from participants in the formal process that "Consortia specifications aren't real standards". The wording of documents like OMB A119 has been used by participants in the formal process to prove that consortia produce inferior standards. While I understand that A-119 was never intended to place a barrier between formal and consortia standards, it has done so. And in so doing, a

gulf between methods of standardization – not between ideals or beliefs about the efficacy of standards - has been allowed to develop.

I would like to see this gap healed. A request to the OMB to reaffirm that consortia specifications – from consortia who meet legitimate requirements contained in my written testimony – would go a long way to removing some of the stress in the system. This reaffirmation that legitimate standards come from consortia would also give these groups credibility outside of the U.S. – leading to an increase in their ability to position themselves as they have within the U.S. It could serve to reunite those of us who "standardize", reminding us that we all do believe in a common goal.

There are other things which could be done – a larger role for NIST in acting as a neutral, embedded and empowered observer who can help to make sense of the activities of multiple consortia and formal organizations, for example. But these things would be additive to the major goal of removing the mistrust between organizations who believe in standardization. In my testimony last September, I stated that "ANSI is necessary, but not sufficient" for the IT industry. The strength of the IT industry lies in its ability to seek new forms and outlets for its inventiveness, and it has done so in standards. It has not rejected the old – it has merely added a different form of organization to its arsenal. With the affirmation of the consortia as a legitimate form of a voluntary standardization organization, you will be again helping U.S. industries who create and use specifications retain their global competitiveness.